

WHAT IF I'M A NARCISSIST AND NOT A VICTIM?

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 31 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, Rachel and I are going to be answering two questions from listeners. The first question has to do with rebuilding your life after divorce, and the second question is about worrying or wondering whether or not you are actually the dysfunctional one in the relationship. So hi, Rachel. Welcome to the podcast.

RACHEL: Hey! Good to be here.

NATALIE: Let's listen to our first question, okay?

CALLER 1: Hi, Natalie. My question pertains to what you would say to a woman who is now on the other side of divorce and happy for that because of the peace she has. But I was in the homeschool movement, and I have four kids. There is overwhelming anxiety and sometimes even fear about someone ever wanting a woman who is in her forties, has kids, and is just starting over in life with career and everything. There's this overwhelming fear that I am doomed to never find that again because no one would ever want to take all of that on. I've kind of resigned myself to a life of loneliness in that area because I left. I'm curious how you got to a place where you believed God could do that again for you or bless you with that again despite leaving with kids in midlife? Thank you.

NATALIE: Well, Rachel, you are still single. I know you have a relationship.

RACHEL: Yes, I have.

NATALIE: But you've been single longer than I was, so what are your thoughts on this?

RACHEL: I love that she... We know in our heart that relationships are God's gift to us, right? Unfortunately, the relationships we've been in have been anything but a gift! They have been a horrific burden. It's funny, because the word "gift" in German means "poison." Just a little side note for you.

NATALIE: What!

RACHEL: Yeah, I'm not kidding. It means "poison."

NATALIE: Oh my word.

RACHEL: It's been a poisoned present for us, unfortunately. We long to have those relationships that we thought we were getting into in the first place. That is a good thing, I think. I do want to share, though, that I have had to really make sure in my own mind that I don't treat that as just another idol or a false god that I am worshipping to where I start loving that "gift" more than the person who is giving it – God – who is giving it to us as a blessing.

So, yes, I do have a relationship now. But it is so much easier now for everything to be in alignment, because it is healthy. God can be God; my partner can be my partner – and he truly is a partner in every sense of the word. That is such an amazing blessing. But I don't ever want to start holding onto that to where he is my god. I have lived in a situation where I had to, in a sense, "worship" my husband as a false god in my house, because that is the way it was set up. It was horrible.

I do want to encourage her to start seeing the worth that she has inherently in herself. She's looking at it like, "I've got these kids. I was a homeschooler. I'm starting a career. Who in the world would want me?" I think that's pretty much what she said. Those are things that are often a trap, because that is the world's message to us. Your worth is defined by whether or not you have kids, whether or not you've got a great career, and all these different factors. It's not that they aren't true. You do have kids. That's not being in denial about it, but that's not where your worth comes from. Your worth is inherent in you as a daughter of the King. It is unsurpassable! You are worth more than anything.

To start seeing yourself through His lens is going to position you better in order to have a healthy relationship where you are not just diving on the first crumbs that are thrown your way because someone happens to think you are pretty or something like that, but as someone who sees you through that same lens that you see yourself, as someone of unsurpassable worth. That's going to be the foundation for a healthy relationship when you see yourself as very valuable with someone who has a lot to offer. Someone who is going to have it needs to also bring what they offer to the table.

NATALIE: That's a lot! What you just said, that's a lot. There are so many different rabbit trails we could go down. You made me think of match.com. Neither you nor I did that, but we do know people who have used it and have found a good partner on there. It's a journey on an online dating site, because you must weave your way through a lot of

bad stuff.

RACHEL: I can only imagine.

NATALIE: Yeah. It feels like a meat market a little bit. But when you go on there, you are advertising yourself as a product in some ways. "This is what I have to offer you. I'm single. I have no kids. I have a thriving career and a lot of money. I'm really good looking and my body is awesome." We think, "Okay, now that's a good product. Someone is really going to want that product." But if you are thinking of yourself as, "Jeepers. I'm just starting my new career. I'm homeschooling. I've got four kids and I'm a divorced Christian woman. I've got sag in my belly because four kids grew there." Now you are saying, "That's not a very good product. Who's going to want that product?" This is a completely wrong paradigm to look at finding a new partner from.

RACHEL: You are not a commodity, okay?! You're not. That's not who you are.

NATALIE: First of all, to give you a little hope, Rachel and I both know lots of Christian women who have been divorced in their forties, fifties, and sixties, who are now happily remarried and thriving in their new marriages. Some of them had two kids. Some have grown-up kids. Some still have small kids. Some are like me. I had nine kids.

RACHEL: Nine kids!

NATALIE: Exactly! At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter what your career is, how many kids you have – all that Rachel said. None of those things matter. What matters is who you are as a person, and that out there somewhere there is going to be another human being of value and worth who finds you of value and worth for who you are. That's the kind of person that you want. You don't want the kind of person who is looking for just the great body, great looks, a pretty face, no kids to get in the way, a brand-new career so you don't have any money to bring to the table, or whatever. You don't want that guy.

But here's the trick, though. You might think, "I'll never attract another narcissist because a narcissist is going to want money, time with me, and the ability to control me. They won't like that I have..." No, that's not necessarily true. These guys are looking for what they can get out of you. If you are an easy target or if you are ready to lay everything down for the first person who comes along and says, "I love you. You're so awesome. You've got a great personality. I love spending time with you," you are going to sell yourself out. I think a quality person is not going to do that, anyway. A quality person is also going to be taking their time.

Here's what I was thinking, Rachel. I was thinking that if you bring two people together who are really solid as far as how they feel about themselves... You like yourself. Yes, we all have things about ourselves that we don't like and things that we feel insecure about. That's just human nature. But for the most part you think, "I appreciate who God made me. I've accepted that I have different parts – some that are amazeballs and some not so much – but as we all are, I'm a mixed bag and I've accepted that. I'm good with myself. I enjoy spending time with myself. I enjoy my life as a single..."

Let me just interject here. I am doing a podcast interview with a woman who was a single mom for many, many years – like, two decades. She's divorced from an abuser. She didn't want to get remarried until her kids were grown up and out of the house. She waited on purpose. She ended up getting married to a man she had met during that time that she was a single mom. But during the time that she was single, she was thriving. She discovered some important things about being single that were amazing. She's going to share some of those things in this podcast episode coming up. It's going to be great. Tune in for that one, because it's important that we end up liking ourselves.

One of the things she said is that she realized during that time how important friendships with women were. She got close with several different women in her life. (Not close in a kinky way. I feel like I have to clarify that these days. But close in a really deep, friendship way.) She'll tell her story, but one of her close friends ended up, ironically and coincidentally, getting married right before she did... All of that to say, there are other things to focus on. Don't just go on a man hunt. I think we should go on an "us" hunt.

RACHEL: Yes! Fill your life with people, things, and activities that you love, that build up your self-worth and who you are, and rebuild your sense of identity. I think that is so important, because we have been shattered in so many different ways. We want to be whole. We want to be able to offer ourselves to someone who is also whole. I think she was eluding in the end to this loneliness and fear that she is going to be alone. Even if you are not in a relationship in that way, as Natalie mentioned, other relationships with safe people who just love you because you are you are going to be so healthy and will fill that loneliness for you. Cloud and Townsend's books "Beyond Boundaries" and "Safe People" are good resources. "Beyond Boundaries" will help you know when you are ready to get into a relationship. I haven't read "Safe People," but Natalie, you have, haven't you?

NATALIE: Yeah, that's a great one to read at any point in your journey even if you are still married, because a lot of times, survivors who are still married to someone who is problematic have a lot of other problematic relationships because they tend to put up

with more crap from people. That book teaches you what not to put up with, how to find safe people, and how to eradicate unsafe people from your life. Those are two great recommendations. Are there any things that you are doing as a single person to get healthy and just be content in your singleness, Rachel? What do you do to make your life happy?

RACHEL: I'm just healing. God has me on this journey where I see more and more the effects of trauma in my life. I don't like it. I'm doing EMDR, and I'm doing healthy Bible reading and fellowship. I think really honing in on yourself and seeing things that have been there all along that you didn't realize affected you in these different ways or were caused by pain and anguish in your marriage. I'm really zeroing in on those things right now.

NATALIE: I got married two days after my divorce was final, but that's a long story. I was separated for almost two years, and then the divorce took almost two years. So I was single for almost four years. During that time I did counseling, EMDR therapy, read a lot of books, and some of those other healing things. But also, for the first time in my life, I also looked out for myself. I started buying myself a birthday present and a Christmas present. I'd buy something really special for myself. For one year, I did a massage once a month. I had a friend who was a masseuse, and I treated myself to a massage. I wasn't getting any physical touch, obviously, because I wasn't married or anything, so I did that to nurture my body. I did what I would have called "indulging" myself before. I would have thought it a sin to indulge myself.

Another thing I did was to get an Audible membership and listen to Audible books. I sat down to a good movie with a glass of wine when my now ex-husband had the kids and I was by myself. Or I might have some friends over or go out to eat with some friends. Those are the kinds of things that I started doing to bring pleasure and joy back into my life and to say to myself, "You, Natalie, are special, and I've got your back." I think that's really important. By the time I met Tom, who is now my husband, I felt like I was much more badass – like, "You cross my boundaries and you're out." We were friends for a long time before anything ever developed. I just held him at arm's length for quite a while because I was not going to betray myself anymore.

RACHEL: Yeah. I think what you're talking about is something that I've had to come to terms with. Learning to trust yourself again is so important, because I sort of betrayed myself by marrying my first husband. There's a lot of factors that went into it, but I didn't do something that was healthy for me. So my radar is really sensitive now on that. I'm learning how to make sure that I have the skills and the ability to be trustworthy on behalf of myself. That's a really big key.

NATALIE: Right. How about if we move on to our next question? Let's listen.

CALLER 2: Hi Natalie. This is Kim. I had a question and a concern about the topic of narcissism based on almost three decades of exposure to an emotionally psychologically abusive husband. He was classified in therapy as a narcissist. I have great concern because I think I, as the abused, have been possibly taking on some of those same traits, and it bothers me. I didn't know if this is normal for the abused to begin to change some of those behaviors based on exposure. I have some concerns with it, because I don't want to be that to anyone else. Let me know if this is common and how to handle it.

I'm starting to think I am crazy in that department. My husband just sent me a long text message asking me to pray about my decision, how he has changed, how I have a hardened heart, and how it is going to destroy my son, our family, our lives, our finances, and so on. Here's where I think I'm a narcissist. I pray that I'm not, but I literally have no empathy. I'm going to use a cuss word: I really don't give a rat's ass anymore, and I have no emotion as far as how his feelings are concerned. That really bothers me. I usually am a very empathetic person. Is that normal to get to a point where you literally don't care? Help!

NATALIE: I think a lot of people have this question. I know I struggled with this. Did you ever struggle with this, Rachel?

RACHEL: Yeah. Well, I have regrets about the way that I acted sometimes. Part of that was that I opened myself up to be attacked by him because I would stoop down to his level, and then suddenly he had me, right? I think that happens a lot. You are frustrated and fed up. You are being baited and being accused. It's like you are in a mud pit with a pig and you are wrestling with him on his level. That's not who you are. I want to say flat out that narcissists don't ask themselves if they are narcissists, so the fact that you are asking this means that you aren't a narcissist.

NATALIE: That's absolutely right.

RACHEL: You absolutely can pick up traits when you are in that environment, but that doesn't mean that it's a permanent state of being. If you don't like it in yourself, you have the power to change it in yourself.

NATALIE: Have you heard of the term "narcissistic fleas"?

RACHEL: Yes, and I'm so glad you brought that up, because I wasn't certain if that was a

good thing to say. I don't want to compare people to dogs or something that gets fleas, but "narcissistic fleas: is a good term, because you pick up fleas by being around a dog or something that has fleas. You don't want those fleas, and you can't get rid of them!

NATALIE: The Bible even says if you walk with the wise you will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm. So whoever you are hanging out with, the kinds of people you are hanging out with and spending time with, will have an influence on you. If you are living with, sleeping with, and raising children with someone who is foolish, negative, critical, and angry, that is going to rub off on you. It's inevitable. It doesn't mean that's who you are or who you would be if you hadn't been living with that person for so long. But that is going to happen. Those fleas are going to come on you.

So you get away from the person. You detox from them, wash yourself off, and get yourself clean, and then you find out that, "Thank goodness I am not that." I can tell you from personal experience that who I am in my relationship with Tom is who I am. I am myself. I actually really like myself, and I'm not this crazy person that I was when I lived with my ex who drove me bat-shit crazy on a regular basis. I was going to recommend a book here called "The Dance of Anger" by Harriet Lerner. Have you ever read that, Rachel?

RACHEL: No. I think you've mentioned it before. It's really good, huh?

NATALIE: I loved that book, because I was so angry. Some survivors I talk to, I'm not sure if they are just super sweet people who don't have an angry bone in their body. But I had this really strong sense of injustice, and I have been this way since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. When I see something that is not fair or not just or someone lies... I hate lying. I absolutely go bonkers when someone is trying to deceive me or when I see someone lying to someone else. I get really, really angry.

That doesn't mean that I – well, I have screamed and yelled – but first I will try to address it. I'll call it out and say, "Hey. You can't do that. You just cheated. I just saw you cheat; you can't do that," or "You just stole that; you can't do that," or "You just flat-out lied. You can't do that with me." What would happen with my ex is that he would do something, and I would call him out. I would get very angry because, as you know, abusive people never take responsibility. He would deny, blame shift, justify, minimize – the whole nine yards – and then I was left thinking, "Now what do I do?" I would get really mad. I felt like I was this raging lunatic after twenty-five years of living with that.

So I read this book and realized... She uncovers the key and says, "Here's what the problem is." We get angry when we've lost control over something. The answer is to

take back control of the things that you can take back control of and to let go of the things that you cannot control anymore. I couldn't control who my ex-husband was, how he operated, his worldview, and perspective on things. I couldn't control his behavior. What I could control is my reactions to it and whether or not I stayed in the relationship.

That's why I decided to leave. I took back control of my life. I said, "If you are going to continue to treat me like this, I will not be in a relationship with you anymore. I don't care if I am a Christian, I don't care if the church does excommunicate me (which they did), and I don't care if I do lose family and friends. I will not tolerate someone treating me like this anymore, because I am a human being, I have feelings, and I have a perspective of my own. I deserve just as much respect and care as anybody else on this planet deserves."

RACHEL: What a concept!

NATALIE: "God treats me with respect and care, and you will too if you want to be in relationship with me." His answer to that was that he gave me the proverbial finger (not really, because he would never do that) and he continued to treat me like that, so now we aren't together anymore. Now I'm with someone who does treat me with respect and care. So get that book if you feel angry. I have a lot of other thoughts, but I'm going to let you talk now, Rachel.

RACHEL: You have such great points there, Natalie, because the ultimate decision to sever that relationship is what gave you your power back. The things that you were able to have control over you got back after you had limited contact with him.

I think there is so much power in limited contact. You can never reason with these people. They are never going to take responsibility for themselves. That is so evident in his text message to this caller that she described. He hasn't changed. He's projecting. He's guilt-tripping. He's giving her the whole works of everything in his arsenal in order to get you back under his control. Of course you don't have any feeling towards what he's saying, because that part of you is shut down. That's a good thing, because he's using that to control you!

NATALIE: Exactly! You really want to get to that place where you have disconnected. To this woman who is worried that she doesn't have any feelings of empathy towards him anymore, it shows that you've done a lot of healing and a lot of detaching. You're in a much better place now to be able to move forward into your future. So kudos to you!

RACHEL: Yes. Here's the other thing I want to point out. She cares about the fact that she doesn't care about his feelings. That bothers her. That is not narcissistic behavior, so she is going to be just fine. She didn't say this, but I'm guessing that she has empathy towards other people in her life: Her kids, her friends, and her family. I'm guessing that she is selectively unable to have feelings towards him because of everything that has happened between them, everything he has done to her. That is understandable. That's okay. You shouldn't keep letting someone hurt you.

NATALIE: Exactly. The scene that came to my head is if you lived with a cat that was constantly scratching you and biting you every time you came near it, after living with that cat for ten years, would you have warm fuzzy feelings toward that pet? No! You would not. That's normal. None of us have warm fuzzy feelings towards people who are constantly criticizing us, tearing us down, blaming us, shaming us, and refusing to live in a respectful, loving relationship with us.

RACHEL: What you may have, though, is sadness that the cat wasn't what you thought it was going to be. When you got it, you envisioned this wonderful, healthy relationship with lots of purring and scratches and stuff, but that didn't happen.

NATALIE: Too bad. You need a new cat. That's what I say. Just go out and get a new cat. Take that one to the pound. I'm just kidding. I was going to add that you don't have a hard heart. The illustration that Cloud and Townsend use about boundaries is that you have a house and a yard. (I've talked about this before, but I will reiterate it anyway.) You have your own house and yard with a fence around it that defines where your life begins and ends and where someone else's life begins and ends. They are your next-door neighbor. If they are coming into your house and yard and disrespecting you, pulling out your roses, and being mean, if you've been long suffering and patient for many years and you finally say, "You have to get out now. Stop. Stop pulling my roses out. Go pull your own roses out," you aren't being hard-hearted.

When that person stands by the gate and says, "You're being hard-hearted. You're being mean to me because you won't let me come in and pull your roses anymore," that sounds like a toddler to me. Just look at them and say, "No. I'm not being hard-hearted. You're the one being hardhearted, because you continue to insist on coming into my yard and pulling out my roses. Because you haven't stopped, you cannot be here anymore. I'm an adult, and I'm going to shut the gate on you now. I don't have a hard heart. I cared about you. I wanted you to be able to come over and have a relationship with me, but you weren't interested in that. You just wanted to pull roses. So, goodbye."

I think that when these kinds of people accuse you of things like that – saying that you are hard-hearted – they are just causing you to question and doubt who you actually are. They are going to accuse you of the exact opposite of what you are. It's usually what they are.

RACHEL: They are projecting.

NATALIE: Exactly. They are projecting their issues onto you. What I tell people to do is this exercise where you take what they say to you and then say the opposite. So if he told you that you are hard-hearted, you would say... There is a spiritual component to this. Satan is trying to get you to doubt who you are, to undermine you, and to neutralize you. He will tell you lies that are the opposite of who you are, and he will use your abuser to do that. The reality for this caller is that she is actually an extremely empathetic person, that she is a very soft-hearted person who gives people lots of chances before finally saying, "This is not working."

But she is also an adult person who has taken back her life and made a very adult, mature, grown-up, healthy-boundaried decision to not allow other people to take advantage of her and take over control of the things she is supposed to have responsibility for, which is her own life. I say good job and keep going. For all the rest of you who are feeling like big bad meanies, you're not. You're actually amazing, powerful women, and you have an amazing, incredible destiny ahead of you. You are going to rise up and do incredible things on the face of this earth.

RACHEL: Yeah. We see you. It's such an adventure, because we don't know these women personally, but we know them. It's always this set-up. You usually have a husband who is hard-hearted with a wife who just wants to make things work and does everything she can. That takes a lot of empathy. That's just the way it is. The women I've met through Flying Free are some of the most kind, loving, warm-hearted, generous people you could ever get to know. They are not what their husbands accuse them of. They are the opposite. That's what makes it so horrific because it is such a lie.

NATALIE: One last thought that I had is that when you think about how Jesus was with people when he was spending part of His life on earth, you never see Him... Was He hard-hearted towards spiritual narcissists like the Pharisees just because He told them really hard things? No. He called them out. He told them what they actually were – whitewashed sepulchers holding dead men's bones. They told Him, "You're the son of the devil."

RACHEL: Literally, they called Him the son of the devil. Think about it.

NATALIE: Yeah. They did, which is, again, the exact opposite of who He really was. I'm sure they said things like, "He's hard-hearted. He doesn't obey God." Whatever. But that didn't stop Jesus from doing the adult thing. Of course, He wasn't hard-hearted at all. He is love. The Bible says He is. Whatever love is, that's who He was and is.

I think we're going to wrap it up here. Thank you, Rachel, for joining me again today. Thank you, guys, for listening. If you want to take just a few seconds and go over to Apple Podcasts and leave a review on this podcast, that is what helps people to find us. Quickly do that and leave a rating. Ratings are from one to five. If you leave a review, that gives people a more specific idea of what it is about this podcast that means something to you. That's it. Thank you for joining us. Until next week, fly free!